United Nations A/63/349

General Assembly

Distr.: General
9 September 2008

Original: English

Sixty-third session
Item 116 of the provisional agenda*
Multilingualism

Interim report on the impact of the activities carried out by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization during the International Year of Languages (2008)

Note by the Secretary-General

The Secretary-General hereby transmits an interim report of the Director-General of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) on the impact of the activities carried out by UNESCO during the International Year of Languages (2008), in accordance with General Assembly resolution 61/266.

* A/63/150 and Corr.1.

08-50194 (E) 031008

Interim Report on the impact of the activities carried out by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization during the International Year of Languages (2008)

Report of the Director-General

Summary

The present report, prepared by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), is submitted in accordance with General Assembly resolution 61/266, entitled "Multilingualism". Paragraph 25 of the resolution proclaimed 2008 International Year of Languages and invited UNESCO "to serve as the lead agency for the Year". Subparagraph 25 (b) requests the Director-General of UNESCO "to report to the General Assembly at its sixty-third session on the impact of the activities carried out during the Year".

The present document contains UNESCO's interim report on the activities carried out during the initial months of the International Year of Languages, which was launched on 21 February 2008. A further report will be transmitted by UNESCO following the conclusion of the Year on 21 February 2009.

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I. Introduction

1. The present report is submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution 61/266 on multilingualism, in which the Assembly proclaimed 2008 International Year of Languages and invited the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to serve as the lead agency for the Year. In the resolution, the Assembly also invited the Director-General of UNESCO to report to its sixty-third session on the impact of the activities carried out during the International Year of Languages. The resolution further invited Member States, the United Nations system and all other relevant stakeholders to develop, support and intensify activities aimed at fostering respect for and the promotion and protection of all languages, in particular endangered languages, linguistic diversity and multilingualism.

2. The International Year of Languages was officially launched by the Director-General of UNESCO at UNESCO headquarters on 21 February 2008, International Mother Language Day, and it will officially come to a close on 21 February 2009. The present report is a mid-term review, covering the activities undertaken to date. A final report on the implementation of the Year, including a qualitative assessment, will be transmitted to the General Assembly after the official close of the Year.

II. General Assembly resolution 61/266

3. In its resolution 61/266, the General Assembly refers to the specific role of UNESCO in the field of languages policy: (a) takes note of the entry into force on 18 March 2007 of the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (para. 23); (b) welcomes the decision taken by the General Conference of UNESCO that 21 February be proclaimed International Mother Language Day (para. 24); and (c) proclaims 2008 International Year of Languages, pursuant to the initial resolution for an International Year of Languages adopted by the General Conference on 20 October 2005 (para. 25). The objective of the International Year is to develop, support and intensify activities aimed at fostering respect for and the promotion and protection of all languages, in particular endangered languages, linguistic diversity and multilingualism.

4. General Assembly resolution 61/266 follows a series of important decisions taken as regards languages and multilingualism in the last decades, since the Vienna Declaration adopted by the World Conference on Human Rights on 25 June 1993, affirming the right for persons belonging to minorities to use their own language (para. 19) and the call of the Assembly in its resolution 54/64 of 6 December 1999 for more attention to multilingualism. The latest standard-setting tools adopted at the international level in this area include the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity and its Action Plan adopted by UNESCO in 2001, the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage adopted by UNESCO in 2003, the Declaration of Principles adopted by the World Summit on the Information Society in 2003 (paras. 52 and 53), the Recommendation concerning the Promotion and Use of Multilingualism and Universal Access to Cyberspace adopted by UNESCO in 2003, the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions adopted by UNESCO in 2005, and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples adopted by the General Assembly in 2007 (res. 61/295).

III. Preserving languages and promoting multilingualism

5. Within the United Nations system, UNESCO has been assigned, since its creation, a special mission in the field of language promotion and preservation. Languages are expressly mentioned in the first article of the UNESCO Constitution. For this reason, support for translation, teaching in the mother tongue, protection of endangered languages and the strategic link between languages and education have been at the heart of many of the Organization's programmes throughout its existence.

6. General Assembly resolution 61/266 was adopted at a time when humanity is particularly concerned by the threat faced by many languages of the world, a threat which jeopardizes the cultural diversity that they embody. It is recognized that languages and multilingualism are important means of promoting, protecting and preserving diversity and cultures globally. Languages, with their complex implications for identity, communication, social integration, education and development are of strategic importance for people and the planet. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) include the cutting of poverty by half by 2015, achieving universal primary education, promoting gender equality, combating diseases and ensuring environmental sustainability. A multilingual approach in both policy and practice is essential for these goals. Communication is the lifeblood of collective and cooperative action for change, and choice of language can determine participation, access to knowledge, information sharing, leadership, and depth of understanding. A vehicle of knowledge and tool for communication, it is through language that we identify ourselves, understand people and the world, and develop.

7. The past 30 years have seen a dramatic increase in the death or disappearance of languages. Nowadays, within the period of a few generations, more than 50 per cent of the 7,000 languages spoken in the world may disappear. The need to address this matter is indeed becoming more acute under the pressure of accelerating globalization, in which languages with their complex implications in terms of identity and social integration, both globally and locally, are of strategic importance. Thousands of languages worldwide are still absent from schools, parliaments, tribunals, media, cyberspace and publishing. Processes related to globalization have also increased the pace at which languages are disappearing, thereby leading to an immeasurable loss for both linguistic and cultural diversity.

8. Far from being a phenomenon concerning only culture or other specific domains, languages endangerment is a problem affecting the entire United Nations family, as it has an impact on a series of domains that are vital and strategic for international cooperation, peace and development.

9. In fact, besides representing a dimension of human existence and an integral part of human identity and culture, languages are a key factor for analysis and action in different policy areas. As a highly interdisciplinary domain, languages and multilingualism are strategic in regard to the most essential challenges facing humankind, and have to be taken into account in the development of strategies to meet the Millennium Development Goals:

(a) Linguistic factors play a strategic role in the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger (MDG 1) because the ability to use the environment, to participate and to develop effective empowerment largely depends on language

skills: marginalization or integration, poverty or development may be largely affected by linguistic policies and strategies;

(b) Linguistic factors are essential to achieving universal primary education (MDG 2) and responding to HIV and AIDS, malaria and other diseases (MDG 6) because language is the principal medium of knowledge transmission; to be effective and adapted to the culture and needs of the learners, education (including health education) and literacy programmes must be delivered in languages understood by those learners;

(c) Languages are strategic for environmental sustainability (MDG 7), as they enfold and convey local and indigenous knowledge and know-how of the natural milieu.

10. To highlight the paramount importance of languages for the most important challenges, it is also necessary to underscore that the actual enjoyment of fundamental rights — including freedom of expression — is conditioned to a large extent by linguistic factors, as languages provide an essential medium for exercising those rights. Problems in accessing or mastering languages may reflect difficulties in the actual exercise of those rights.

IV. The International Year of Languages

11. This pervasiveness of languages as a strategic dimension for development lies at the heart of the awareness-raising campaign launched by UNESCO in its capacity as lead agency for the International Year of Languages, based on the slogan "Languages matter!" As stated in the message issued by the Director-General for the International Year, the notion that "languages matter!" should be promoted everywhere and in different cooperation areas "whether it be through initiatives in the fields of education, cyberspace or the literate environment; through projects to safeguard endangered languages or to promote languages as a tool for social integration; or to explore the relationship between languages and the economy, languages and indigenous knowledge or languages and creation".

12. To mobilize all relevant partners of the UNESCO and the United Nations family, a website for the International Year (www.unesco.org/en/languages/2008) was launched in December 2007 in six languages (Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish) and regularly updated, also providing pages in several other languages. A guidance and advocacy kit (also in six languages) has been distributed in printed form and can be downloaded. The website has been very popular and many inquiries have been addressed to it and to UNESCO, particularly from private individuals, the private sector, institutions, and non-governmental organizations with regard to activities they intend to undertake in relation to the International Year.

13. The message of the Director-General for the International Year, calling upon Members States and civil society partners to mobilize, has been published online in more than 30 languages, and the slogan of the Year has been disseminated in over 200 languages.

14. The Year was officially launched by the Director-General at UNESCO headquarters on 21 February 2008, International Mother Language Day. The launching ceremony was followed by an international workshop on the theme

"Standard-setting instruments promoting multilingualism", co-organized by the Council of Europe, and focusing on the standard-setting instruments in the field of multilingualism, a question that is currently under debate at UNESCO.[1]

15. In response to the mobilization campaign of UNESCO, some 170 multi-stakeholders projects have been launched during the first half of the International Year, both at the international and national levels.

16. In this context, as in others, UNESCO National Commissions have played a strategic role in the implementation of the International Year, several having set up a national International Year calendar, including a variety of initiatives in different domains.

17. On the UNESCO website for the International Year, all are encouraged to list their projects, large and small, on the available electronic "Project List".[2] The list currently numbers 180 initiatives. The majority of the International Year projects implemented so far are educational initiatives promoting inclusion and quality learning by supporting bi- and multilingual education, especially the use of the mother tongue, at all levels and in formal and non-formal settings, as well as projects focusing on safeguarding endangered languages. Other initiatives concentrate on building knowledge societies in which everyone can participate and benefit: promoting universal access to information and wider access to information and communications technologies by ensuring the use of a greater number of languages; promoting cultural and linguistic diversity in the media and international information networks. Other projects aim at enhancing communication and collaboration between scientific researchers and institutions across linguistic divides; translating and disseminating scientific materials to communities in order to overcome language barriers; and recognizing the central role of vernacular languages in indigenous ways of knowing.

18. Among important international awareness-raising initiatives organized under UNESCO auspices in the first half of the International Year worth mentioning are the meeting on African languages as integration factors (UNESCO headquarters, Paris, 28 May), the launching of the Chirac Foundation and its languages programme called Sorosoro (Paris, 9 June 2008), the international conference "Everyday Multilingualism" (Eisenstadt, Austria, 13-15 June 2008), and the international conference on "Globalization and Languages — Building on our Rich Heritage" (the United Nations University, Tokyo, 27-28 August 2008).

19. During the seventh session of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (April 2008), a plenary session was dedicated to indigenous languages, and UNESCO hosted a side event on "Indigenous Languages and the Media". A special debate on the theme "Protecting indigenous and endangered languages and the role of languages in promoting Education for All in the context of sustainable development" will be held in the framework of the 180th session of the Executive Board of UNESCO (October 2008).

20. Given the priority assigned to Africa within UNESCO strategy and programmes, the African Academy of Languages (ACALAN), in its capacity as the specialized organization of the African Union for language policy, has been

[1] See decisions 176 EX/59 and 179/EX/10 adopted by the Executive Board of UNESCO in 2007 and 2008, respectively.

[2] Updated list available at www.unesco.org/en/languages/2008.

regularly consulted as regards the implementation of the International Year. In the framework of the global multi-stakeholders network for cultural diversity "Maaya", ACALAN has created with the support of UNESCO, a consultative committee for the International Year in charge of the promotion of the Year's celebration. Ongoing discussions between ACALAN and UNESCO will focus on the establishment of operational guidelines of the Linguistic Plan for Africa, to be launched, if possible, during the International Year.

V. UNESCO action in favour of languages and multilingualism relevant to the International Year of Languages

21. UNESCO action is not limited to the role of lead agency for the International Year of Languages, as much of its programme of action favours languages and multilingualism and thus corresponds to the objectives of the International Year. The UNESCO Medium-Term Strategy for 2008-2013 recognizes the multidisciplinary nature of languages, as both strategic tools for development and a fundamental aspect of culture. By promoting linguistic diversity and multilingualism, UNESCO intends to contribute on the one hand to cultural diversity and dialogue and, on the other hand, to consolidate the role of culture in development strategies, namely within the United Nations system.

22. In this context UNESCO intends to advocate, support and monitor actions at the global level in favour of the principles enshrined in or derived from UNESCO normative tools related to languages and multilingualism,[3] as well as to other relevant United Nations normative frameworks.[4] At the local level, UNESCO intends to support the elaboration of coherent national (and when possible regional) language policies that promote appropriate measures both at conceptual and practical levels. This will prepare for wider use of as many languages as possible in families and communities and in all domains of public life (education, media, administration, court proceedings, cultural activities and facilities). In particular, UNESCO wishes to play an active and specific role within the United Nations system, in particular by drawing the attention of United Nations stakeholders to the importance of linguistic factors in the United Nations Development Assistance Framework process, and by advocating the integration of the relevant Conventions into national development plans.

23. In the field of education, UNESCO is working at contributing to national language policies and strategies through multilingual education and the introduction of mother tongues in formal and non-formal education systems and literacy programmes. It is understood that all Education for All programmes take into account languages as a quality factor. Examples of fully or largely implemented initiatives of this kind include the International Conference on Multilingual

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[3] Convention against Discrimination in Education (1960); Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity and its Action Plan (2001); Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003); Recommendation concerning the Promotion and Use of Multilingualism and Universal Access to Cyberspace (2003); Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (2005).

[4] For example: International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966) and Declaration on the Rights of Persons belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities (1992), United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007).

Education: Challenges, Perspectives, and Opportunities (New Delhi 5-8 February 2008), a series of projects on teaching in mother-tongue education in primary education in Thailand, Vietnam and Cambodia, and the project "Promotion of Siswati" in Swaziland.

24. In the field of sciences, the UNESCO programme concentrates on the recognition of languages as vehicles for transmission of local and indigenous knowledge on issues related to natural resource management and sustainable development. As an example of ongoing initiatives in this field, the Local and Indigenous Knowledge Systems Project (LINKS) project builds dialogue among traditional knowledge holders, natural and social scientists, resource managers and decision makers to enhance biodiversity conservation and secure an active and equitable role for local communities in resource governance. The survival of indigenous knowledge as a dynamic and vibrant resource within rural and indigenous communities depends upon its continuing transmission from generation to generation.

25. In the domain of social and human sciences, the Organization works for the enhancement of a human rights-based approach to issues related to languages and multilingualism, the criticality of languages and multilingualism in migration analysis and policy, in particular in urban contexts, and the roles of languages and translation in intercultural dialogue.

26. Concerning culture, the programme focuses on the promotion of cultural and linguistic diversity and intercultural dialogue, the preservation of endangered languages and the promotion of multilingualism, especially in creative industries (the publication industry and cinema in particular). Examples of fully or largely implemented initiatives of this kind include the evaluation of the impact of UNESCO projects in favour of endangered languages (capacity-building in safeguarding African language and oral traditions and expressions in sub-Saharan Africa) carried out between 2004 and 2007, and language-related work carried out in the framework of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage,[5] as well as projects for the modernization of the publication industry (in national languages) in Senegal and Madagascar. Also worth mentioning are the update of general reference tools like the Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger of Disappearing (scheduled for December 2008), the *Index Translationum* (international bibliography of translators, already updated twice in 2008), and the promotion of film subtitles.

27. In the domain of communication and information, UNESCO is promoting pluralism and cultural diversity in the media and international information networks through the development of multilingual diverse content and policy advice for the inclusion of new languages in the cyberspace/digital world. An example of ongoing initiatives is the follow-up of Action Line C8 of the Geneva Plan of Action, adopted in 2003 by the World Summit on the Information Society, focusing on cultural diversity and identity, linguistic diversity and local content. The third international multi-stakeholder facilitation meeting on Action Line C8 was held in May 2008 in Geneva. Other examples of activities in the field of communication and information include:

[5] The "intangible cultural heritage" is manifested, inter alia, in "oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage" (see art. 2, para. 2 (a), of the Convention.

(a) Internationalized domain names

At its thirty-second public meeting held in Paris from 21 to 26 June 2008, the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) approved the introduction of internationalized domain names (IDNs) in the top level of Internet addresses, which will enable millions of users to access the Internet using their own, non-Latin scripts. UNESCO strongly advocates for a multilingual Internet that ensures universal access to information and knowledge and strives for the protection of cultural diversity and local content in cyberspace; the introduction of IDNs is an important step towards achieving these goals. UNESCO participated in the policy design within ICANN through its Governmental Advisory Committee. UNESCO, in its role as lead international agency for the promotion of linguistic and cultural diversity, was recognized as a key actor to advise ICANN on linguistic issues. The Organization will continue to raise awareness among its Member States that use non-Latin scripts on the importance of IDNs and build capacity in Member States to ensure that all linguistic communities can participate in the global information networks;

(b) Internet Governance Forum

The Internet Governance Forum creates unique opportunities to foster dialogue among actors with the aim of building a common understanding around essential principles and compelling issues related to the Internet, covering aspects that range from the technical to the public policy and ethical concerns. Many of the issues raised in this debate are considered by UNESCO to be of crucial importance to the future use of the Internet, in particular those impacting on the recognition of cultural diversity and multilingualism on the Internet. UNESCO is committed to work towards the multilingualization of the Internet and continuously promotes linguistic diversity in the debates of the Forum. One of the workshops UNESCO will organize at the next Forum, to be held in Hyderabad, India, from 3 to 6 December 2008, will focus on multilingualism to guarantee inclusion and full participation of all actors;

(c) Recommendation concerning the Promotion and Use of Multilingualism and Universal Access to Cyberspace

As a follow-up to the Recommendation concerning the Promotion and Use of Multilingualism and Universal Access to Cyberspace adopted by the General Conference of UNESCO at its thirty-second session in 2003, UNESCO regularly updates the status of implementation of the Recommendation and provides information on the measures taken by Member States for its promotion and application. The first consolidated report was presented in 2007 to the General Conference at its thirty-fourth session and the second report will be presented at its thirty-sixth session, in 2011;

(d) Initiative B@bel

Within the framework of its programme "Initiative B@bel", UNESCO continues to advocate with a variety of partners the inclusion of new languages in the digital world, the development of local content in cyberspace, and provides support to measure linguistic diversity on the Internet. UNESCO also works to provide online tools to facilitate international cooperation and serve multilingualism communities worldwide;

(c) Linguistic diversity in the media

In its resolution 61/266, the General Assembly also invites the United Nations system to develop, support and intensify activities aimed at furthering respect for and the promotion and protection of all languages. In this regard, UNESCO-supported community multimedia centres help preserve and foster local languages. Several activities were undertaken with minorities in favour of linguistic diversity in the media. The following examples can be mentioned:

(i) In Guatemala, a network of young Mayan communicators was created. The aim of the project was to generate the largest number of agents capable of broadcasting messages in the 22 Mayan languages of Guatemala, spoken by 60 per cent of the population. The challenge is to make broadcasters become the interlocutors among linguistic communities and the population in general by promoting the use of the Mayan languages in Guatemalan media as an instrument for freedom of expression;

(ii) In Mexico, a project was carried out together with Fomento Cultural y Educativo, A.C., a non-profit association. The objectives of this project were to reinforce community communication in 80 communities from the Nahuą, Otomí and Tepehua regions, through the use of radio. The challenge is to promote freedom of speech in the communities, diffuse in four languages as well as develop technical and communicative capabilities of the correspondents who work and live in the rural areas of the nahua, otomí, tepehua and racially mixed communities, by training and involving them in the radio activities;

(iii) In Paraguay a website will be developed with information on climate change in Paraguay in Spanish and Guarani, including in audio format with the objective to increase the presence of Guarani language in the Internet.

28. Intercultural actions focus on the mobilization of partners for the International Year of Languages, and for the International Mother Languages Day (21 February), and the publication of a report on the normative tools and principles of relevance to languages (to be issued in 2009), as well as the recognition of language factors within all relevant projects.

29. All the programmes are implemented with the specific needs of women and girls duly taken into consideration as a priority, with particular attention to gender roles in the languages transmission.

VI. Conclusion

30. The International Year of Languages is advancing well, and additional actions are being organized over the next six months leading up to its official close on 21 February 2009. The overall impact of the Year has been to raise awareness and contribute to a shift in practices and policies at many levels towards languages and multilingualism.

31. UNESCO wishes to draw the attention of the United Nations system to the fact that languages should be considered as an interdisciplinary domain and a strategic factor for analysis and action in different policy areas. Many multilateral projects in the field of international cooperation, peace and development could be better

planned, implemented and successfully achieved if linguistic factors were taken properly into account, and if they were delivered in the languages of their beneficiaries.

32. To overcome the difficulties encountered in the field for the effective development of multilingual society, where different languages coexist harmoniously, and to meet the different educational, societal and economic needs of all citizens, UNESCO calls upon Member States, the United Nations Secretariat and all United Nations specialized agencies to develop common initiatives in this field, in particular in the United Nations Development Assistance Framework process that is an essential area for the "Delivering as One" joint work.